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Author(s): Donna Carroll

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How my ignorance informed my library

I have been working in the library sector for two years now but I'm no librarian. I came into this field after first studying for a PhD in physics and then working as a further education lecturer in mathematics – not your typical humanities degree followed by work experience and library school. I never thought I would be working in a library but then libraries never used to have as many diverse posts and services as they do today.

I currently work in research and development for the Academic Services division within the University of Warwick's Library. This role involves the management of service developments through evidence-based research, in response to users' changing practices and expectations due to developments in the wider environment (such as advances in web 2.0 tools and other technologies). I am also responsible for the delivery of a range of projects including the production of e-learning packages and other initiatives supporting the needs of our users. This is where my previous experiences of research and the education sector help me to offer a different range of skills to the typical librarian.

So, if I didn't have the usual library experience and skills, just what do I bring to the library?

Research skills and experience

Over the last two years I have used my experiences to manage a new facility within the Library that is dedicated to the Library's research community, the Wolfson Research Exchange. My understanding of the research process has enabled me to empathise with our users and thereby tailor our provision of services to suit the community. The users also acknowledge that I have been through the same process as they are currently undergoing and so I am seen as a mediator or a bridge of communication between them and the library management – 'I speak their language' so to speak!

I now head up the Academic Services development wing within the Library's Academic Services Division so once again my previous experience of the research process has been invaluable in providing me with a systematic approach to my research, especially when it comes to planning and managing project work, writing up and disseminating results and analysis.

Teaching experience

My experiences in teaching and learning have also provided me with a pedagogic perspective to our developments so that the learning applications can be fully considered when creating new e-learning packages, e-tutorials and other online teaching and learning resources for the Library. As a member of the University of Warwick's alumni (where I studied from 2001 to 2008), I also fully understand and appreciate the needs of the average user since I was one! This can help to inform developments and also allows me to empathise with users when we collect feedback and survey their needs.

General ignorance

Aside from the skills that I bring to my library role, I also bring with me a whole load of ignorance. What do I mean by that? Having never trained as a librarian, I do not know about the Library and the services it has on offer. Although I was a university student for many years (I completed my undergraduate degree and PhD at the same university and a PGCE at a different institution) I had not really used a physical library in all this time I was studying. Moreover, I had never even heard of a subject librarian. This lack of awareness may now appear rather shameful, especially as I have spent the last two years learning with amazement about all of the support and information skills I could have found so valuable and time effective when I was studying. However, what this insight (or should I say, lack of insight) provides me and my managers with is a clear identification of what works – and what doesn't work – for libraries. As I don't speak the library language and I do not reside in the library

‘box’, I have a better idea about what the students want, what they care about, what they haven’t got a clue about and what messages are or aren’t getting through.

...and a joy of discovery

When I came for my job interview at Warwick’s Library I was amazed to find back offices in the library. Before that I had no idea that there were other people working in libraries except those who work on the front desks and those who stamp or shelve books! But now, everyday I watch such hard working people trying to get their message out to students (and staff) who are just as ignorant as I once was. Librarians are so keen to help and yet the rest of the university community are so quick to overlook the library and the full range of services they now offer.

Libraries are not just about books, journals and silent reading spaces, they offer one-to-one consultations to help with your research, advise on where to publish and can teach us to understand journal impact factors, bibliometrics, referencing techniques, video-editing skills and even provide technology-enriched spaces to facilitate new ways of working whilst bringing communities together to encourage a more collaborative approach to learning. This is an opportunity of which everyone could – or should – be taking advantage. Through my prior ignorance I am now able to help by pointing out the key barriers that the library needs to overcome to get their message out to the rest of the university, while also acting as an advocate of the service – “I didn’t know any of this but if only I had...!”. That is the message I can deliver and this is what the librarians and managers at Warwick Library recognise and appreciate most – the outsider’s perspective that I am able to offer and because of that, they have given me the opportunity to come and work for a library without being a trained librarian. What’s more, the library have now even taught me how to do the research part of my job more effectively using the services and support I had missed out on whilst a student, and I am certainly making up for it by making the most of it now!

So my advice is that it's time not only that libraries embrace non-librarians for the different skills sets and strengths that they offer, but also that non-librarians should seek the challenge and interesting environment the modern day library has to offer. Together we can make a difference.

Dr. Donna Carroll

Academic Services Development Manager

Academic Services

The University of Warwick Library

Email: donna.carroll@warwick.ac.uk